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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a two-part study first undertaken in a juvenile detention facility in the Northeast in order to assess the need for programs to increase self-esteem within the facility. In the first part of the study, a self esteem inventory was administered to incarcerated males aged 14-19. In the second part, the inventory was administered to a comparison sample of youth attending high school in three communities. Scores of this sample were compared with scores from 202 members of the same three ethnic groups (Caucasians, Latinos, African Americans) at the detention center, for a total of 399 participants. Findings suggest that there was no evidence to indicate that male juvenile delinquents suffer from low self-esteem, and neither was there evidence to indicate that they suffer from high self-esteem. They report that a comparison of self-esteem scores of incarcerated male juveniles with their nondelinquent counterparts suggest that there is an interaction between ethnicity and incarceration. Overall, results suggest that a single approach to raising (or lowering) self esteem among male juvenile delinquents of any ethnicity is ill-advised. (Contains 20 figures, 8 tables, and 14 references.) (JDM)

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# Cultural Differences in Self Esteem: A Study of Delinquent Male Adolescents

By

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# Cultural differences in Self Esteem: a study of delinquent male adelescents

Paper presented at the National Association of School Psychologists Convention in New Orleans. April 1, 2000.

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## Introduction

Open any publisher's catalogue, and you will find a wealth of programs for raising students' self-esteem. But does higher self-esteem lead to higher achievement and more effective behavior? Is self-esteem a prerequisite for success in school and in life?

As the availability of packaged "self-esteem programs" for children has increased, critics of the "self-esteem movement" have become more vocal. Is self-esteem directly related to success? Does it vary by culture or ethnic group? Is it a correlate, but not a cause of success? Can too much self-esteem actually hinder success?

We will address these questions as we present our research on self-esteem in incarcerated and non-incarcerated inner-city adolescents. This presentation should help school psychologists and educators make better-informed decisions about when, where, whether, and how much to use self-esteem programs.

## Background Information

The impetus for the contemporary focus on self-esteem may perhaps be traced to the conclusions of the California State Department of Education's Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (1990). Their conclusion that low self-esteem is at the root of a variety of educational and societal ills sparked a frenzy of self-esteem-building across the country. As the availability of packaged "self-esteem programs"



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for children has increased, critics of the "self-esteem movement" have become more vocal (see Baumeister, Smart and Bowden, 1996, and Shokraii, 1996). These critics have questioned whether self-esteem really is directly related to success, whether it varies by culture or ethnic group, and whether it might not be a correlate, rather than a cause of success (Anderson, 1994; Baumeister, Heatherton and Trice, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). A recent line of research has raised the possibility that too much self-esteem, bordering on narcissism, might actually hinder successful social development in children (see Edens, Cavell and Hughes, 1999, and Hughes, Cavell and Grossman, 1997).

At the same time, however, studies of the relationship between self-esteem and depression have indicated a robust relationship between low self-esteem and depression, even in young people (see Battle, 1992 and Harter, 1993). Other studies have reported correlations between self-esteem and academic achievement and between self-esteem and health-related variables (see Filozof, Albertin, Jones, Steme, Myers and McDermott, 1998). Thus, there is a good deal of apparently conflicting data regarding the role of self-esteem, particularly in regard to the development of prosocial and antisocial behavior.

One reason for this confusion may be due to investigators' use of different measures that operationalize self-esteem differently. While most contemporary investigators appear to agree that self-esteem is a multidimensional construct (see Harter, 1993), there is less agreement on the specific subscales that should be measured. In particular, investigators from different disciplines (e.g., health education vs. psychology) tend to use different measures (see Battle, 1992, Filozof, 1998, and Hughes et al, 1997). In addition, the possibility has been raised that the important issue may not be whether a person has high or

low self-esteem, but whether or not their self-esteem—whatever level-- is stable (see Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry and Harlow, 1993).

Another reason for divergent results in the literature on the relationship of self-esteem with academic and personal success may be a function of the ethnic diversity of participants in more recent studies. Our literature searches and catalogue reviews yielded no self-esteem measures for children and youth that were normed on a multicultural sample. What evidence we did find suggested that there are indeed significant differences in the way different cultural groups socialize their members to "esteem" themselves (see Brooke, 1995 and Holaday, Callahan, Fabre, Hall, MacDonald, Mundy, Owens and Plappert, 1996).

Finally, there did appear to be one potential clue to unraveling the contradicting results reported in the self-esteem literature, and that relates to the population under investigation. Studies of "mainstream" populations often report a relationship between high self-esteem and desirable, prosocial outcomes, such as school achievement and social success. By default, then, one might assume that the converse is also true—that individuals with low self-esteem are prone to antisocial outcomes. However, studies that focus on antisocial individuals—e.g., criminals, aggressive children, or delinquent adolescents--have not found a predominance of low self-esteem among their participants. Edens, Cavell and Hughes (1999) described three different types of aggressive children in their sample of elementary school participants: those with realistically high self-regard (i.e., self-reports, peer reports, teacher-reports and parent reports concurred that the child was well-regarded by others), those with realistically low self-regard, and those who had unrealistically high self-regard (i.e., they indicated high self-regard, but significant others did not agree). Although

some aggressive children could be found in each of the three groups, the group with unrealistically high self-regard had the highest proportion of aggressive children.

## Study of self-esteem among incarcerated male juvenile delinquents

The following study was undertaken in a juvenile detention facility in the Northeast, in order to assess the need for programs to increase self-esteem within the facility.

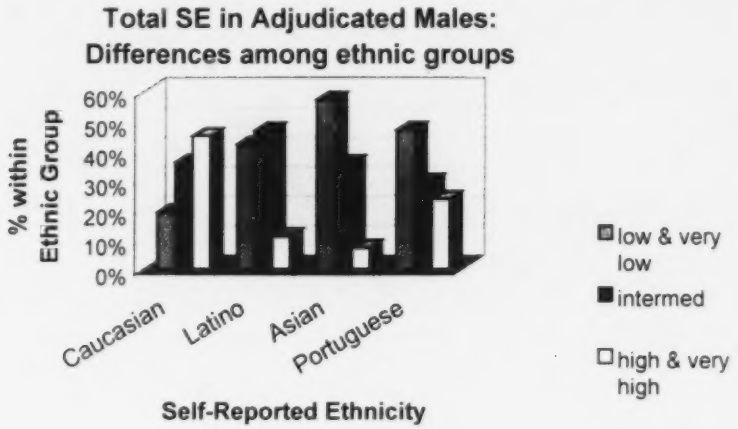
### Method (part 1)

Form AD of the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory-2nd Edition (CFSEI-2, Battle, 1992) was administered to 305 males, ages 14-19 (M=16.6), who were incarcerated in a juvenile detention center in the Northeast. Participants included all adjudicated males who entered (or re-entered) the center over a nine-month period. The ethnic backgrounds of the sample were self-reported as: 32% Caucasian; 21% Latino; 20% African American; 6% Portuguese; 6% from Cape Verde, Haiti, Jamaica or the Dominican Republic; 5% Asian; 3% Native American and 7% "mixed" (i.e., some combination of the other groups). Forty-eight percent had a history of having been in Special Education classes at some point in their school careers (based on school records), and 16% had a self-reported history of having been in ESL classes. Average IQ was in the low-average range (based on record reviews or tests administered at the detention center); average reading level was 6th grade (based on screening tests given at the detention center). Because of the high incidence of reading difficulties, the CFSEI-2 was administered individually or in groups no larger than four, by examiners who were trained to use the same instructions and explanations for all participants.

Results (part 1)

Overall mean scores for Total Self-Esteem for all adjudicated males was 21.9, which fell in the "intermediate" range of Self-Esteem (the test manual reports the "intermediate" range for Total Self-Esteem to be 20-26.) There was a significant difference between those who had a history of special education classes (n = 155, X = 20.9) and those who did not (n = 148, X = 22.8), $F$ (2, 301) = 3.91, $p < .05$.

There were significant differences among group means, $F$ (7, 297) = 4.74, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2$ = .08., with Caucasians (X = 24.04) scoring significantly higher than Latinos (X = 20.05), Portuguese (X = 19.12) and Asians. All groups except Asians scored in the "intermediate" range (20-26) according to the test manual. The mean Total Self-Esteem score for Asians fell in the "Low" range (14-19).




It should be noted that despite its name, the CFSEI-2 was not normed on individuals from different ethnic groups, and researchers using the children's form of this test have reported ethnic differences (see Brooke, 1995 and Holaday, Callahan, Fabre, Hall MacDonald, Mundy, Owens and Plappert, 1996). In order to determine the meaning of the

scores we had obtained at the detention center, we decided to collect normative data for the CFSEI-2 from communities surrounding the detention center, from which many of the incarcerated youth originated.

Method (part 2)

In the second part of the study, data were collected from a "comparison sample" of youth attending high schools in three communities. There was no one community that contained all ethnic groups that were represented in the detention center. Since the point of this study was to match ethnic groups of non-delinquent youth as closely as possible to those in the detention center, data were collected from convenience samples that consisted heavily of one ethnic group or another, in each community. The "comparison group" in Study 2 therefore consisted of CFSEI-2 forms completed by 172 males from three ethnic groups, ages 13 – 19, in grades 6 through post-secondary school, who reported no criminal arrests. Scores from this sample were compared with scores from 202 members of the same three ethnic groups at the detention center, for a total of 399 participants. Overall, there were roughly comparable numbers of incarcerated vs. community Caucasian males (100 vs. 102) and Latino males (64 vs. 49). Due to data-collection limitations, however, there were significantly more incarcerated African American males (63) than community males (21) in this sample; thus results of this study for African Americans should be viewed with caution.

**Participants (by Location), by Ethnicity ( 8 Ethnic Groups) Males only**

Count

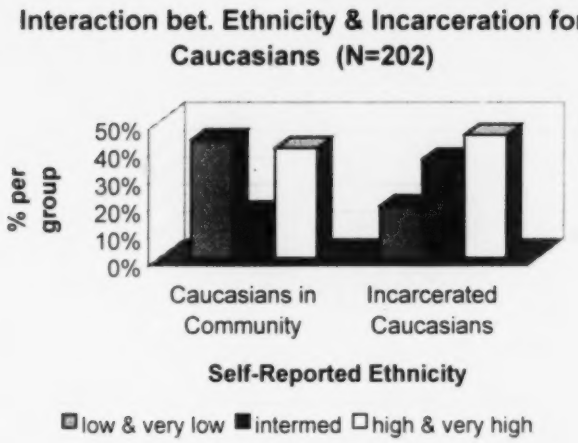
| | | 8 categories Ethnic Grps | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | African American | Latino | Asian | Caucasian | Native American | Portuguese | Cape Verde or Haiti or Jamaica or Dominican | Mixed | Total |
| Group Origin | Incarcerated | 63 | 64 | 14 | 100 | 10 | 17 | 17 | 20 | 305 |
| | City C | 3 | 44 | 1 | 23 | | 1 | 1 | | 73 |
| | City A | 7 | | | 79 | | | | | 86 |
| | City P | 11 | 5 | 3 | | | 3 | | 3 | 25 |
| Total | | 84 | 113 | 18 | 202 | 10 | 21 | 18 | 23 | 489 |

Results (part 2)

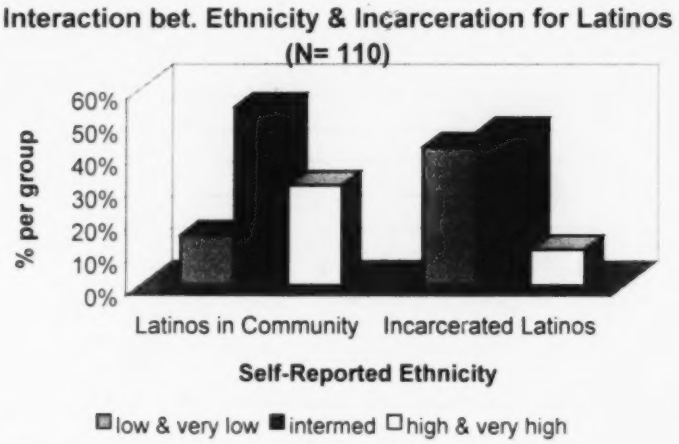
Results of a 3 X 2 ANOVA (three ethnic groups by two levels of "incarceration status": incarcerated vs. community) for Total Self-Esteem scores indicated no main effect for either ethnic group or incarceration status. There was, however, an interaction between ethnicity and incarceration, $F$ (2, 393) = 11.01, $p$ <.001, Eta-Squared = .05, indicating that the effect of incarceration varied, depending upon one's ethnic group.

Specific differences in Total Self-Esteem were as follows:

Scores for Caucasian male youth in the community (n = 102) displayed a bimodal distribution, with approximately 43% scoring in the low to very-low range and 40% scoring in the high to very-high range. Scores for Caucasian male youth in the detention center (n = 100) showed a "stepwise" distribution, with 19% in the low to very-low range; 36 percent in the intermediate range, and 45% in the high to very-high range.




Scores for Latino male youth in the community (n = 49) displayed a positive skew, with close to 31% scoring in the high to very high range, and only 16% scoring in the low to very low range. In contrast, scores for Latino youth in the detention center (n = 64) were skewed in the opposite direction (i.e., negatively), with over 42% scoring in the low to very low range and approximately 11% scoring in the high to very high range.




Scores for African Americans in the community (n = 21) indicated negative skew, with approximately 43% scoring in the low to very low range and just under 21% scoring in

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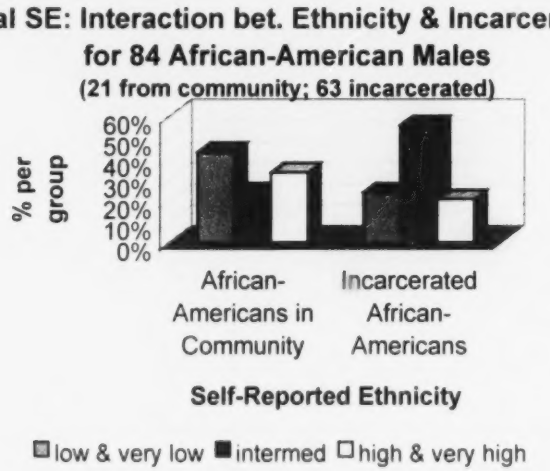
the high to very high range. In contrast, scores for African Americans in the detention center (n = 63) were distributed normally, with over 55% scoring in the intermediate range, 24% in the low to very low range, and 21% in the high to very high range. Note, however, that the number of African American males from the community was small.




Further analyses of subscale scores for the CFSEI-2 indicated that scores for the Social Self-Esteem subscale and scores for the General Self-Esteem subscale followed a pattern similar to that of the Total Self-Esteem scale—i.e., there was no main effect for either ethnicity or incarceration status, but there was an interaction between ethnicity and incarceration status. For Social Self-Esteem, $F(2, 393) = 11.66$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .06. For General Self-Esteem, $F(2, 393) = 12.36$, $p < .001$, Eta-squared = .06. Observation of group means indicated that Latino male youth in the community scored higher on both Social Self-Esteem (X = 6.57) and General Self-Esteem (X = 12.55) than Latino male youth who were incarcerated (who scored 5.67 and 10.36 on these respective subscales), while incarcerated African American and Caucasian male youth scored higher on both of these subscales than their counterparts in the community. (For Caucasians, Social Self-Esteem

scores were 5.49 in the community and 6.67 in the detention center, and General Self-Esteem scores were 12.30 and 10.79 respectively. For African Americans, Social Self-Esteem scores were 5.19 in the community and 6.10 in the detention center, and General Self-Esteem scores were 10.76 and 11.67 respectively.) At the same time, however, mean subscale scores for Social and for General Self-Esteem fell within the test manual's "intermediate" range (M = 6.2, SD = 1.5) for all groups.

Scores on the Personal Self-Esteem scale followed a different pattern from scores on the other two subscales. There was a significant difference among ethnic groups on the Personal Self-Esteem subscale, $F(2, 393) = 3.44$, $P < .05$. Post-hoc tests (Tukey LSD, $p < .05$) indicated that Latinos and Caucasians differed significantly on the Personal Self-Esteem subscale, with the mean for Latinos at 4.55 (95% confidence interval of 4.17 – 4.93) and the mean for Caucasians at 5.18 (95% confidence interval of 4.90 – 5.47). As with the other subscales, however, all ethnic groups did fall within the test manual's intermediate range for this subscale (M = 4.68, SD = 2.43). No group differences were found for incarceration status, and there was no interaction between ethnicity and incarceration status.

## Discussion

Overall, there was no evidence to indicate that male juvenile delinquents suffer from low self-esteem. On the other hand, neither was there evidence to indicate that they suffer from high self-esteem. Rather, the mean scores for all but one ethnic group of incarcerated adolescent males were in the "intermediate" range, according to the CFSEI-2 manual. Incarcerated Asian adolescents scored in the "low" range on average; however, the literature on cultural differences raises the strong possibility that this is due to culture-wide

socialization practices that discourage expressions of self-promotion, and not due to delinquency or incarceration. A definitive answer to this question, however, would have to include a comparison group of non-delinquent Asian adolescents, which this investigation lacked.

Comparisons of self-esteem scores of incarcerated male juveniles with their nondelinquent counterparts suggest that there is an interaction between ethnicity and incarceration. Delinquent Latino males appeared to have lower self-esteem than their non-delinquent counterparts in the community, while the reverse pattern was found for Caucasians.

This interaction is particularly interesting because the length of time a youth has spent in the detention center did not predict self-esteem. This suggests that self-esteem differences between delinquent youth and their culturally similar, non-delinquent counterparts were not a result of treatment programs or other experiences while incarcerated. Instead, they may reflect differences in self-esteem that predated their sentencing. One possibility then, is that in Latino communities, boys with *low* self-esteem are at greatest risk for offending, while among Caucasians, boys with *highest* self-esteem are at greatest risk for offending. Longitudinal investigation with additional samples is recommended.

This investigation was limited by a smaller sample of African Americans from the community than from the detention center, by the lack of sufficient participants from other, less populous, ethnic groups (e.g., Asian, Portuguese and Native American) and by the fact that there is as yet no "culture fair" measure of self-esteem. Overall, however, results suggest that a blanket, one-size-fits all approach to raising (or lowering) self esteem among male juvenile delinquents of any ethnicity is ill-advised. Most male youth's self-esteem

appears to be in the average range, regardless of whether or not they are delinquent. Only a very small proportion of delinquent youth report extremes of very high or very low self-esteem, yet they are involved in antisocial and aggressive behaviors. This suggests that in and of itself, self-esteem is neither a cause nor a consequence of delinquency in adolescent males. If self-esteem is related to delinquency at all, its relationship is more likely to be indirect, perhaps interacting with other variables related to culture, parenting style or temperament. Future investigations of self-esteem among delinquent and non-delinquent youth should therefore include assessments of these other variables. They should also include a direct measure of aggression, since not all adjudicated youth are equally aggressive.

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